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THE SEARCH FOR HEALTH

A Report from
The National Institutes of Health
Bethesda, Maryland

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Syphilis

Syphilis, which swept through Europe in a devastating epidemic during the late 15th century, is now readily treated with antibiotics. However, in many areas of the United States syphilis is on the rise. This sexually transmitted disease, which in its late stages can cause mental disorder, blindness, and death, is caused by a corkscrew-shaped bacterium called *Treponema pallidum*.

The infection is acquired by direct contact with the sores of someone who has an active infection. Although the bacterium is usually transmitted through the mucous membranes of the genital area, the mouth, or the anus, it also can pass through broken skin on other parts of the body. A pregnant woman with syphilis can transmit the disease to her unborn child, who may be born with serious mental and physical problems. The syphilis bacterium is very fragile, however, and the infection is rarely, if ever, spread by contact with objects such as toilet seats or towels.

Because the early symptoms of syphilis can be very mild, many people do not seek treatment when they first become infected. However, untreated infected people can infect others during the first two stages of the disease, which can last for up to 2 years.

The first symptom of *primary syphilis* is a usually painless open sore called a chancre ("shanker"). The chancre can appear within 10 days to 3 months (usually 2 to 6 weeks) after exposure. Because the chancre is ordinarily painless and sometimes occurs inside the body, it may go unnoticed. It is usually found on the part of the body exposed to the bacteria, such as the penis, the vulva, or the vagina.

Secondary syphilis is marked by a skin rash that appears anywhere from 2 to 12 weeks after the chancre disappears. The rash may cover the whole body or appear only in a few areas, such as the palms of the hands or soles of the feet. The rash usually heals within several weeks or months, and the other symptoms subside as well.

It untreated, syphilis then lapses into a *latent* stage during which the patient is no longer contagious. Many people who are not treated will suffer no further consequences of the disease. However, from 15 to 40 percent of those infected go on to develop the complications of late, or *tertiary*, syphilis, in which the bacteria damage the heart, eyes, brain nervous system, bones, joints, or almost any other part of the body. This stage can last for years, or even for decades. Late syphilis, the final stage, can lead to mental illness, blindness, heart disease, and death.

Syphilis is treated with penicillin, administered by injection. Other antibiotics can be used for patients allergic to penicillin. A person usually can no longer transmit syphilis 24 hours after beginning therapy. A small percentage of patients do not respond to the usual doses of penicillin. Therefore, it is important that patients have periodic repeat blood tests to make sure that the infectious agent has been completely destroyed and there is no further evidence of the disease. In all stages of syphilis, proper treatment will cure the disease, but in late syphilis, damage already done to body organs cannot be reversed.

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